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COMMUNITY RELATIONS 1988:
A Profile of the Profession

by Jerry F. Boren and Jerry Wild

A research report from
The Center for
Corporate Community Relations
at Boston College

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FORWARD

A major goal of the The Center for Corporate Community Relations is to serve the educational needs of the corporate community relations executive. We accomplish this by offering institutes, seminars and conferences. We also achieve this goal by conducting studies and providing reports on the emerging corporate community relations profession.

This report, the result of a national survey of community relations executives, is the second in a series of annual studies reporting on the development of the community relations profession. The purpose of this annual survey is to chronicle the growth and development of community relations within the American corporation.

The first survey, conducted in 1987, was mailed to 1596 professionals. As a result of improved tracking and further development of our mailing lists, 3600 individuals received the 1988 questionnaire. Despite the large increase in people surveyed, there is remarkable consistency between the 1987 and 1988 survey data.

The reader will find a number of interesting observations from the survey. I would like to point to only one in this forward, and that is the continuing degree of optimism reflected about the future of corporate community relations. The respondents to both the 1987 and 1988 surveys project increases in their budgets and staffs. Apparently, community relations executives are surviving the downsizing trends in most corporations.

This survey was conducted under the direction of Jerome Wild and Jerry Boren of The Center staff, with production support from Susan Thomas, Judith Lage-Margalejo, Elaine Gottlieb and Jim McCarthy.

EDMUND M. BURKE
Director

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from the second survey of the community relations profession. The first survey, conducted in 1987, established baseline data against which these and future findings can now be compared. While two snapshots of the profession taken approximately 18 months apart do not permit definitive conclusions concerning trends in the field, they do allow one to speak with greater confidence about possible trends and some basic characteristics of the profession.

A distinct picture of the CR field emerges from a comparison of the 1987 and 1988 findings. It has become increasingly clear that community relations is largely a part-time profession, staffed by people who began their careers in related fields and who continue to shift their time back and forth between CR and these related fields—in particular, public relations and communications, public and governmental affairs and employee relations.

This characteristic suggests that community relations is what might be called a "boundary" profession—one that operates on a part-time basis along the boundaries of a cluster of related fields.

Curiously, it could prove to be the part-time "boundary" quality of the profession that protects it from the worst effects of corporate cutbacks and shifting of resources. Responses to questions about budget and staff changes in both the 1987 and 1988 samples suggest that in most departments where CR responsibilities are located, rather than cut overall staff and budget, resources shift among the related fields and CR managers pick up more public relations, public affairs or employee relations responsibilities rather than lose their jobs. Thus, a type of protective mechanism is built into the basic structure of the field.

It is also evident that while community relations is an area where management positions are open to women as well as minorities, women, and to a lesser degree minorities, are

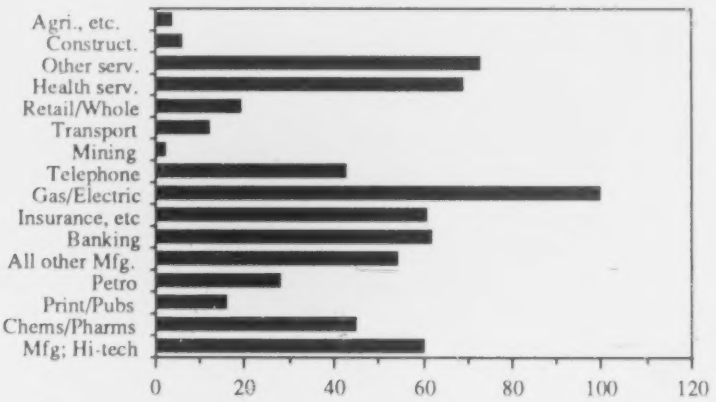
clearly the junior partners. Female and minority CR managers who responded to these surveys are younger than their white male colleagues, have less formal education, lower levels of management responsibility, and, in the case of women, earn less.

While it is premature to draw definitive conclusions, several differences between the two surveys may be evidence of trends in the field. These include the possibility that it is becoming "feminized," getting younger, and even more part-time; that inter-company mobility is on the increase; and that decentralization of the function has peaked or even been reversed.

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

A questionnaire was mailed to a national sample of 3600 CR professionals in August of 1988. A follow-up postcard was sent approximately one month after the initial mailing. A total of 612 questionnaires were returned for a 17% response rate.

Respondents by Industry



Graph 1

A check of the distribution of responses by region shows that the response rate varied from 18% to 24% among the nine federal census regions—an excellent distribution for a national sample.

The sample consisted of all persons on The Center's mailing list whose title suggests some responsibility for community relations. The mailing list has been developed over a period of five years based on The Center's extensive work in the field. It is believed to be the most representative listing of community relations practitioners available.

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

Community relations is clearly a part-time profession. Respondents to the 1988 survey devote an average of 47% of their time to CR (down from 53% in 1987), while only 8% reported full-time responsibilities.

While the 1987 study suggested that women slightly outnumbered men, the 1988 survey shows that community relations clearly attracts a greater number of women. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents to this survey are female and 42% are male. The results also confirm our earlier findings that women are under-represented at senior levels and over-represented at lower levels of management.

The income differential between male and female CR managers identified in the first survey continues to exist and, in fact, may be even greater than previously thought. For the 1988 sample, the median income range for female CR managers is only $30,000-40,000 (it was $40,000-50,000 in 1987), while for males it remained $50,000-60,000. Furthermore, women at all five levels of management identified in this study earn less than their male counterparts, and this continues to hold true regardless of seniority in position. Level of education appears to be an important factor depressing the salaries of women.

This study provides continuing evidence that most CR professionals begin their careers in related fields and later shift into community relations. Common moves are from public relations positions, management positions in personnel, or from administrative staff positions within the corporation.

Once in the CR field, inter-company mobility is limited, though the new data suggest this could be changing. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed have spent their entire CR career with the same company.

The respondents in this national sample were relatively optimistic about prospects for

staff and budget changes in 1989. Only 7% expected a decrease in staff and 11% in budget.

The trend towards decentralization of the CR function discussed in last year's report appears to have stalled and may even have been reversed in some sectors. In several key industries—in particular, telephone companies, gas and electric utilities, and much of the manufacturing sector—decentralization is still very common. However, respondents who work in the banking sector were much less likely to report delegation of CR responsibilities to line managers.

Thirty percent of CR managers surveyed have a graduate or professional degree. This is down from 37% in 1987.

FINDINGS

Educational Background

The findings on educational background continue to show that CR professionals prepare themselves in a few key disciplines. These include the social sciences, business, the arts and humanities, and journalism. Thirty-six percent have earned at least one degree in the social sciences, 21% in business, 20% in the arts and humanities, and 16% in journalism.

The vast majority (95%) of community relations practitioners have earned at least a bachelor's degree. For 65% of the sample, this was the highest degree, while 30% have earned a graduate or professional degree—usually a master's (26%). Only 6% had an MBA.

Summary

Compared with 1987, these findings reflect a 7% decline in the proportion of CR managers who have earned a graduate or professional degree. Whether these differences represent a significant trend or a modest difference between the two samples remains for future studies to determine.

Work History and Career Paths

A majority of the study respondents (58%) have worked in the field of community relations for more than five years. Only 6% reported having worked in the field for less than one year; the median stay is 6.5 years.

A majority (59%) have been in their current position for three years or less with a median stay of 2.7 years. However, many have moved into their present position from elsewhere in the company. Sixty-two percent have been with their current employer for

more than five years with a median stay of slightly more than seven years.

Most community relations managers do not begin their professional careers in the CR field. Members of the study sample began working in the CR field at an average age of 33 and 43% did not assume CR responsibilities when they began working with their present company.

Overall, those without CR responsibilities when they joined the firm worked a median of 7.5 years before assuming such duties. Only 14% were working in CR within the first two years, while a much larger group (42%) did not move into CR until they had been with the company for at least ten years.

While the average entrance age is 33, 40% of the sample assumed their CR responsibilities during their twenties. Thirty-seven percent entered the field while in their thirties;18% began in their forties. Finally, CR is a late career move (50 years or older) for only 4%.

Mobility from one company to another is still limited among community relations professionals. Most respondents (64%) have spent their entire CR career working within a single company. Only 36% began working in the CR field prior to joining their present company. In fact, 38% had not worked in CR prior to their current position in the firm.

A second type of mobility is the movement from one specialty to another. By comparing current and previous titles, we can identify some of the paths that people travel into the CR field. For example, only 19% of the respondents had a CR title prior to their current position. The prior titles of the remaining 81% reveals this group entered the CR field from a wide variety of backgrounds. The largest group (22%) held positions in public relations. The next most common paths were from professional staff positions such as business manager, financial officer, assistant to the President, or other administrative staff positions (12%); and from support staff positions such as administrative assistant or secretary (9%).

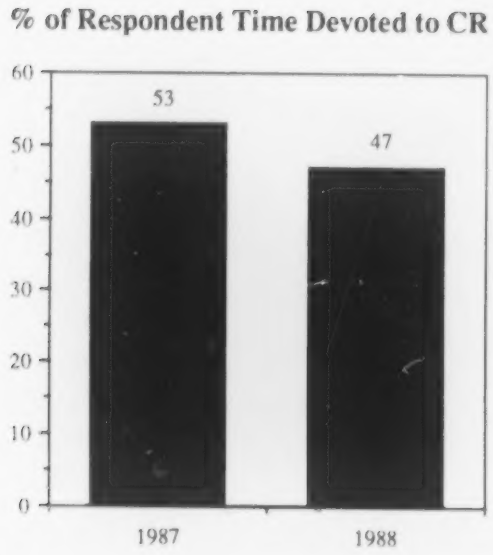
Smaller percentages moved into CR from public affairs (8%), and personnel (8%), while only 4% previously occupied a line manager's position.

Summary

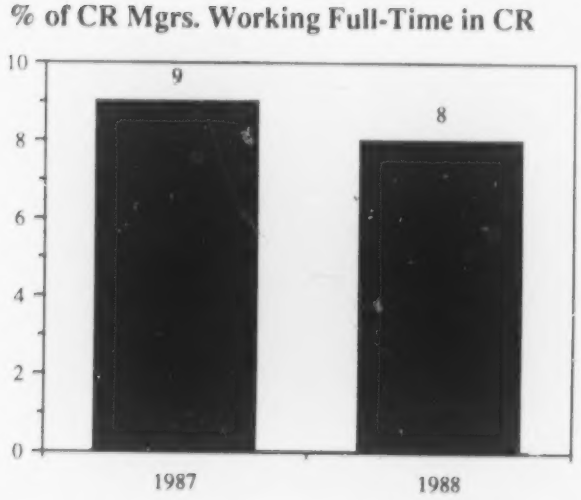
Overall, these findings on work history and career paths are remarkably consistent with the findings from the first annual survey. There is, however, one difference—inter-company mobility—that could prove to reflect a significant trend. With increasing professionalization of the field, it might be expected that persons with CR experience, through networking and a general increase in professional awareness and contacts, would begin to identify and respond to opportunities outside their own companies. The results from this study suggest this could be occurring. The percentage of respondents who have spent their entire CR career in their current company is down from 70% to 64%. While a difference of this magnitude over an 18-month period does not provide conclusive evidence, it will be interesting to compare future studies for this phenomenon.

Job Responsibilities

The part-time nature of the community relations profession revealed in the 1987 survey is further confirmed by this study. Survey respondents devote an average of 47% of their time to CR responsibilities (including contributions) with only 8% devoting full-time. The remaining 92% wear at least one other hat. Most frequently their other responsibilities include public relations (75%), employee relations (62%), or public affairs/government relations (53%).



Graph 2



Graph 3

Most CR practitioners (81%) continue to have some responsibility for the company's foundation or charitable contributions program, with an average of 21% of their time going to this function.

Additional evidence of the part-time nature of community relations: only 18% of the sample are located in a separate CR department, while more than half (51%) are located in public (or governmental) affairs, public relations, or communications.

Summary

A comparison of the 1987 and 1988 findings emphasizes that community relations is a "boundary profession"—an emerging profession struggling for a distinct identity while operating along the boundaries of a cluster of related corporate functional responsibility areas, primarily public relations and communications, public affairs and personnel.

The two key indicators of this status are the percentage of time devoted to CR responsibilities (including contributions) by survey respondents and, derived from that, the proportion of CR managers who devote all of their time to community relations. During the 18 months since the first survey, this first indicator dropped from 53% to 47% and the second remained essentially unchanged (9% to 8%). Again, it will be very interesting to track these indicators from year to year, as they represent critical measures of growth and change in the profession.

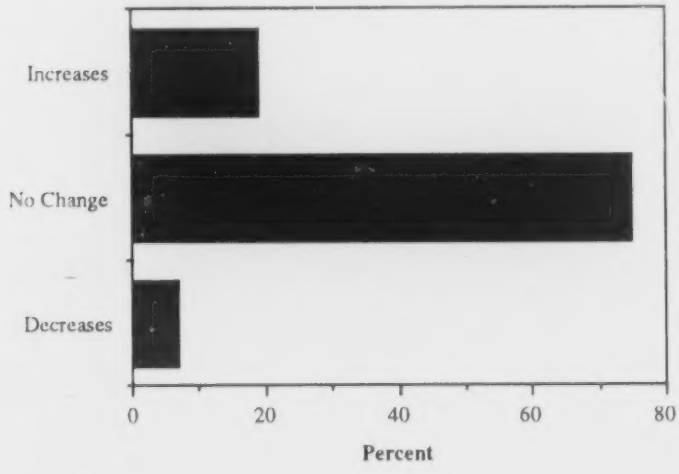
Changes in Department Budgets and Staff

Since the first survey was conducted in early 1987, fears have continued about the negative impacts of corporate mergers, acquisitions, and downsizing on the growth and development of the community relations field. As was the case in 1987, the newest data suggest that the fears may be worse than the reality. During 1988, only 16% of the study

respondents worked in departments where there were decreases in CR staff and 11% reported decreases in budget. On the other hand, 23% worked in departments where there were staff increases and 56% reported budget increases in 1988.

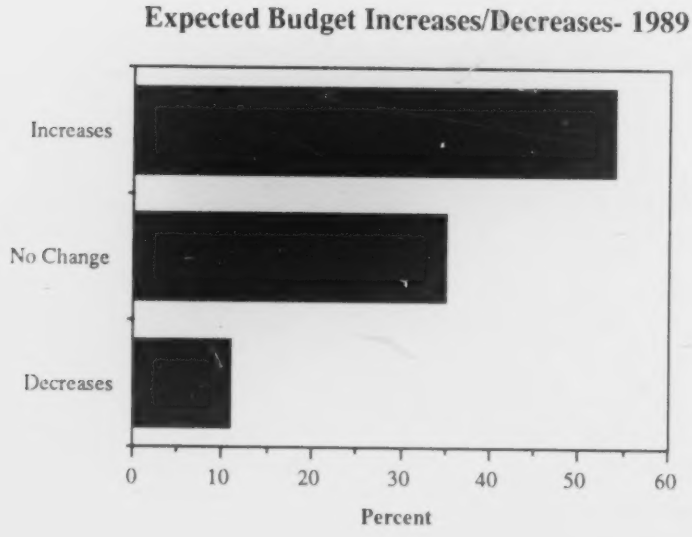
Respondents' overall expectations for 1989 are that departmental growth in community relations staff and budget will be almost as common as it was in 1988. While only 19% expect staff increases, an even smaller number (7%) expect a decrease, and the vast majority (75%) expect no change at all.

Expected Staff Increases/Decreases-1989



Graph 4

Their budget outlook is even more optimistic. Fifty-four percent expect the budget to increase in their department, while only 11% think it will decrease and 35% predict no change.



Graph 5

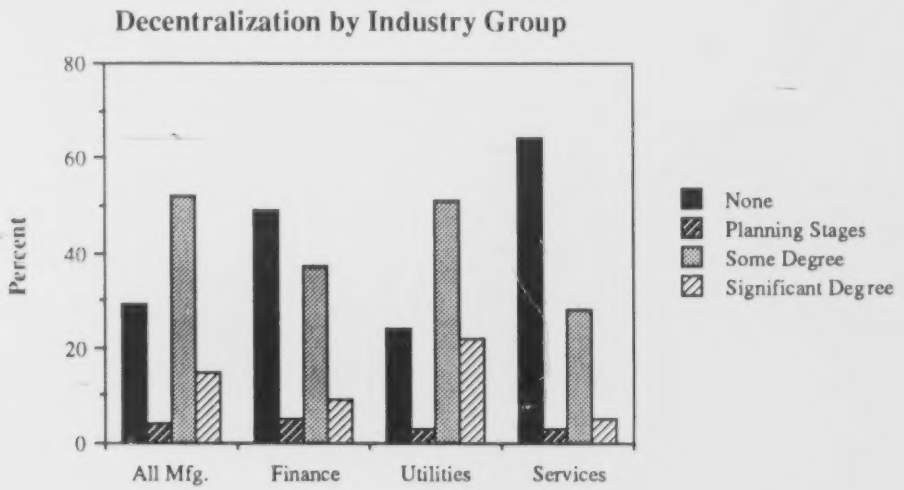
The picture varies somewhat from industry to industry. Overall, CR managers who work in gas and electric utilities, health services, financial services other than banking, and chemical and pharmaceutical firms are more likely to be optimistic about budget increases in 1989. Respondents most likely to express optimism about staff increases were those in service firms (both non-financial and financial). Of interest is that respondents who work for telephone companies are the most pessimistic about both budget and staff changes for 1989. This is a significant change from the previous survey when CR managers in telephone companies were some of the more optimistic respondents.

Summary

For the samples as a whole, there was little difference between reported staff and budget changes in 1986 and 1988. However, this year's sample appears to be more optimistic about prospects for budget increases in 1989 than their counterparts were for 1987. Fifty-four percent—up from 45%—expect an increase in their departmental budget in 1989.

Decentralization of the CR Function

Eighteen months ago when The Center initiated the first survey of the community relations profession, knowledgeable people in the field predicted that decentralization of the CR function was a significant trend and was likely to grow. The shift of CR responsibilities to line managers in plants, branch offices and service facilities was viewed as an important step in the institutionalization of an effective community presence for the corporation. What do the 1988 data tell us about this important phenomenon?

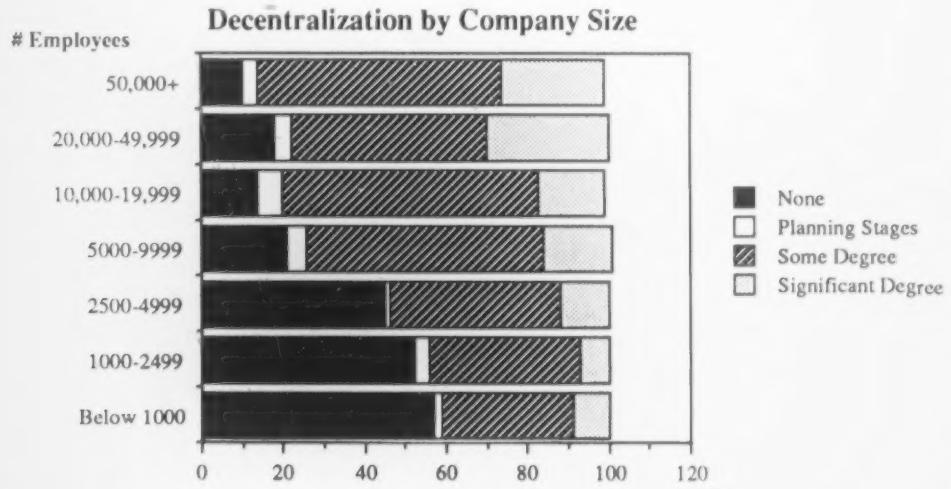


Graph 6

The data from this study indicate that 57% of the respondents work in departments where the CR function has been decentralized to "some degree" or to "a significant degree." An additional 4% say that such a move is "in the planning stages." A significant minority (39%) say that no part of the CR function has been decentralized and there are no plans to do so.

The function is much more likely to be decentralized in some industries than in others. Respondents who work for public utilities and manufacturing firms (other than high-tech or

publishing) are much more likely to report decentralized operations than those who work in insurance or in health and other services. As might be expected, company size is also related to decentralization—the larger a company, the more likely a respondent was to report a decentralized approach to community relations.



Graph 7

Summary

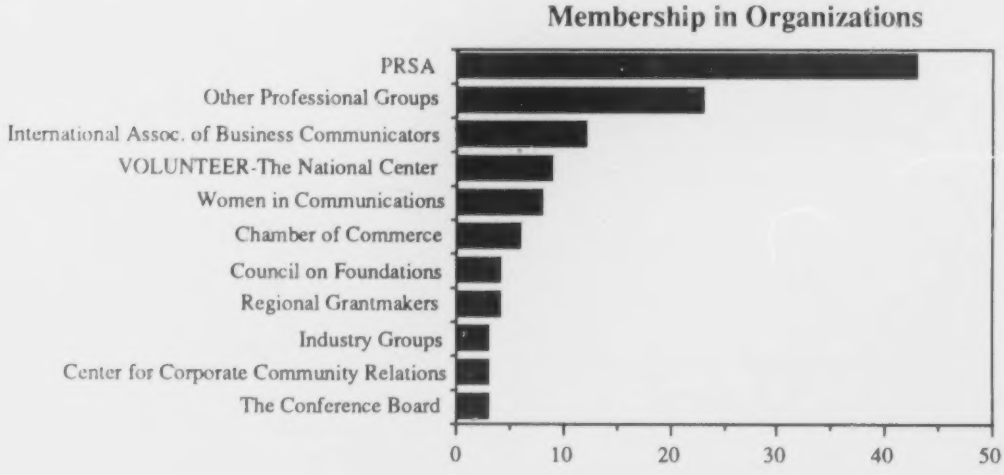
These findings suggest there may be a ceiling effect on the spread of decentralization. It is also possible, though too early to conclude, that the trend has been reversed—at least in some industries.

Professional Development

Participation in professional meetings and continuing education programs are an important indicator of the professional status of a field. The vast majority of the study sample reported attendance at some type of professional development program during the past twelve months. Seventy-nine percent said that they had attended one or more seminars, meetings or conferences related to their work as community relations professionals.

Specific organizations mentioned most frequently as sponsors included, in order of frequency, The Center for Corporate Community Relations and Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Volunteer, Public Affairs Council, The Conference Board, and the Council on Foundations.

Respondents were also asked to list the names of any professional associations to which they belong. Seventy-two percent mentioned at least one organization and reported an average of more than two memberships each. The organization identified most frequently was PRSA—mentioned by 43% of those who listed a membership. Twelve percent are members of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). Twelve percent of the women who listed memberships are members of Women in Communications (WIC).



Graph 8

Summary

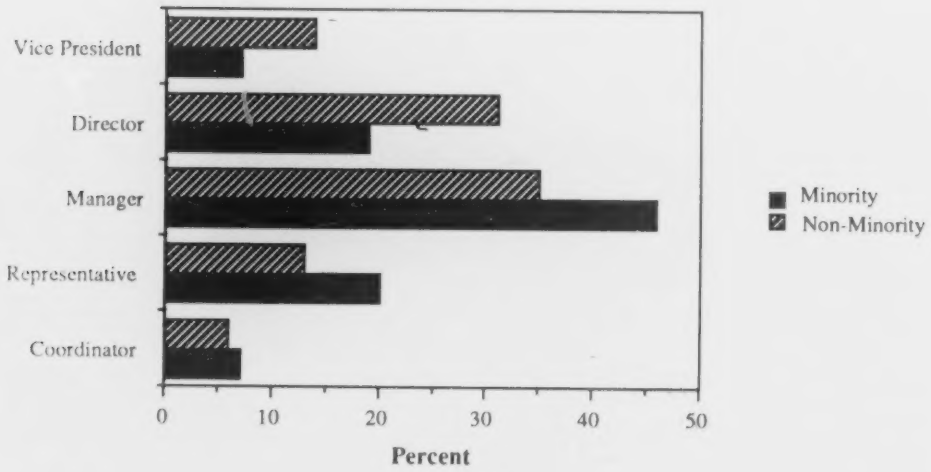
In general, these findings confirm those from the previous survey. CR managers continue to actively pursue continuing education and other professional development activities through their memberships and affiliations with business, trade and professional groups, as well as academic institutions, private service firms and their own companies. The overall numbers have changed little from those reported for 1987.

The new findings do, however, reflect the larger segment of public relations practitioners included in the 1988 sample. An impressive 43% of those listing a membership are members of the PRSA—up from 33% in 1987.

Demographic Characteristics, Income and Status

The 1988 survey produced revealing findings on the status, income and demographic makeup of the community relations field. As in the first annual survey, the data suggest that community relations is an area where corporate management positions are open to women and minorities. Overall, women occupy 58% of the positions surveyed and members of minority groups make up 12% of the sample. These figures continue to be higher than might be expected given the representation of college-educated women and minorities in the national workforce. The average age of respondents is 41; only 11% are under 30. However, female and minority CR managers are younger than the males in this national sample. The average age of both females and minority respondents was 38, while for males it was 45.

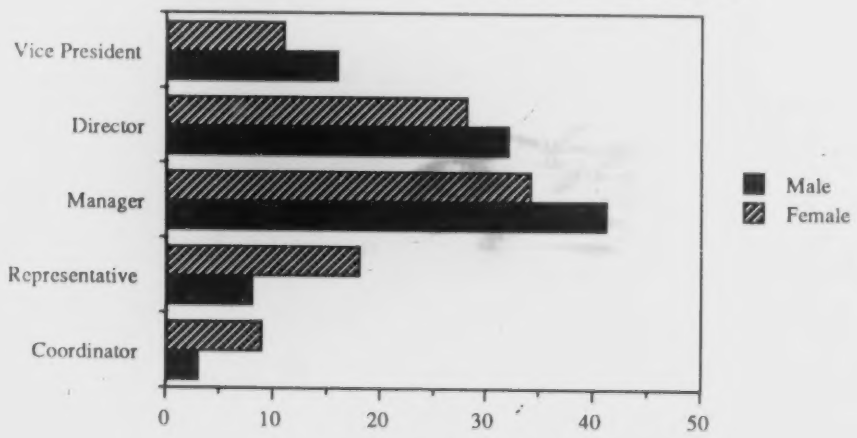
Minority Status by Management Position



Graph 9

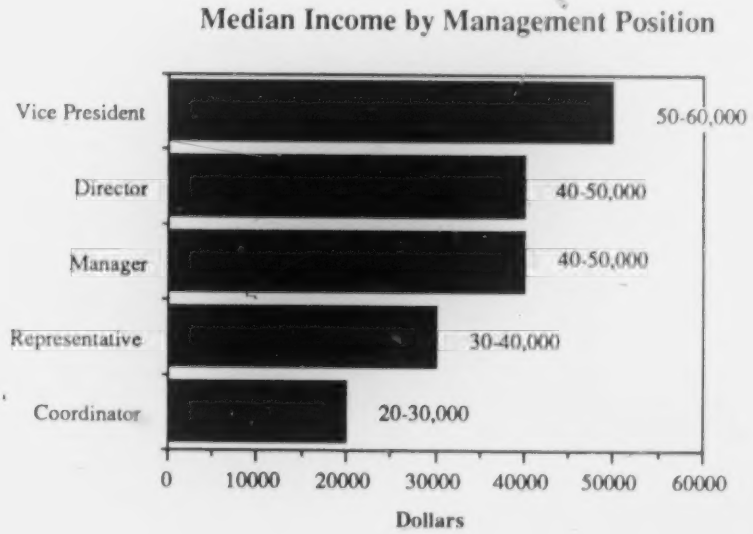
There continue to be five distinct levels of management responsibility in the community relations field as defined by a combination of title and income. The levels are vice president, director, manager/supervisor, representative, and coordinator. The position identified as "representative" includes persons with such titles as officer, administrator, specialist and counselor. Graph 10 shows the distribution of respondents by management position and gender.

Management Position of Respondents by Gender



Graph 10

The median income range for the sample as a whole is $40,000-50,000. However, the findings also show that women earn less than men and are less well represented at the three senior levels and over-represented at the lower levels of CR management. The median income range for female respondents was $30,000-40,000, while the median for males was $50,000-60,000. Some, but not all, of this differential in income reflects the greater representation of men in the higher management positions, since about half of the male respondents are either directors or vice presidents, while this is true of only 37% of the female respondents. However, the findings also reveal a distinct pattern of lower salaries for women at all five levels of management. Perhaps of greater significance is that this income differential persists even when seniority in one's position is taken into consideration. Graph 11 shows the relationship between management position and income.



Graph 11

Summary

While the data on age suggest a slight shift toward a younger cadre of CR managers, it is too early to conclude that this is occurring. What is becoming clearer, when the 1987 and 1988 findings are compared, is that community relations is a field where women outnumber men, but function as junior partners in terms of responsibility and income.

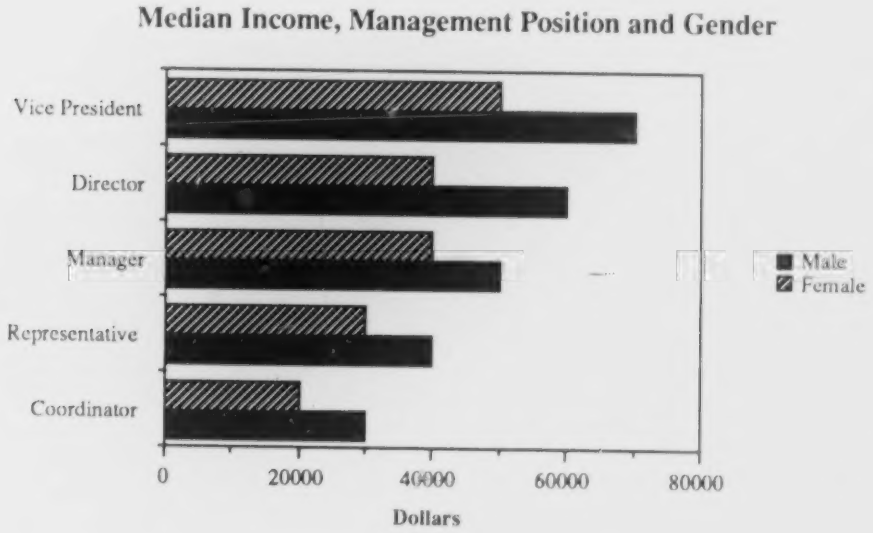
According to several key indicators, the status of women responsible for community relations in American corporations is either unchanged or has worsened since early 1987. Of particular significance are the following:

- the median income range for women in the 1988 sample was $30,000-40,000 compared to $40,000-50,000 in the 1987 sample, while the median for males was unchanged;

- the 1988 data show that women earn less than men at all five levels of management, while in 1987 this was true of only the three senior levels;

- the 1988 finding of gender differences in income within seniority levels shows that these differences are both greater and more universal than they were in 1987. For the 1988 sample, women earn less than men in 20 of the 25 cases, while earning more in only two.

Graph 12 indicates the relationship between income, position and gender.



Graph 12

Because gender differences in income are so consistent among positions and levels of seniority, it is important to try and determine the extent to which these differences are a function of gender bias or to other characteristics, such as age, educational achievement, or academic major. Further examination of the data shows that income does not vary by academic major. While women are more likely to come from a social science background and less likely to come from a business background than are men, they still earn less than men within each academic major grouping. Clearly other factors are at work in depressing women's salaries.

The two most important factors other than gender in determining salary level appear to be educational achievement—as measured by the highest degree received—and age. Both have a strong positive relationship to level of income. Neither of these findings should come as any great surprise, since most studies of income consistently show a strong positive rela-

tionship between educational achievement and income level. However, when these two factors are combined with gender, the median income for females respondents to the 1988 survey is still consistently lower than that for males at all educational levels (no degree, Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate's) and at all age levels.

It can therefore be concluded that while some of the difference in income is because the men are older, hold more senior positions and have greater seniority in position, and have higher educational levels, a significant component probably comes from gender bias in a field that may increasingly be numerically dominated by women.

ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center for Corporate Community Relations at Boston College is the only organization in America committed exclusively to helping corporations maintain a positive presence in their communities while improving the quality of community life.

As a national educational and research organization working directly with community relations professionals in corporations across the country, The Center:

- conducts educational programs that contribute to the professional development of corporate community relations professionals;
- assists corporations in training operating managers for their expanding community relations responsibilities;
- conducts research which fosters positive interaction between corporations and communities;
- maintains an extensive library and unique database of community relations information and program materials to help executives design and develop community relations programs;
- provides consulting services and assists the business community with public service activities to improve the quality of community life.